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Beasts and Bluebeards: Reader Reception, The Fairy Tale and Jane Eyre

Brittany Warman

Sara Cleto

BEASTS AND BLUEBEARDS

Reader Reception, The Fairy Tale and Jane Eyre

by Brittany Warman and Sara Cleto

The 19th-century novel *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë has been frequently mined for its folkloric allusions, particularly the fairy tales that haunt the narrative's characterization, plot, and atmosphere. Moving beyond so-called motif spotting, this article will explore the ways in which two of the main fairy tale intertexts of the novel - "Beauty and the Beast" and "Bluebeard" - duel for supremacy in the reader's mind, creating a tension that ultimately determines reception. Drawing primarily on narrative and reader-response theory, we will argue that the uncertainty regarding exactly which fairy tale is being called upon allows Brontë to create an unexpectedly transgressive novel that uses familiar fairy tales to subvert narrative expectations.

Critics have frequently engaged with the fairy tale themes and motifs in the novel[1], particularly those of "Cinderella," "Beauty and the Beast," and "Bluebeard." "Cinderella," however, has very little to do with the navigation of romantic relationships, focusing

[1] Karen Rowe's essay (1983) is generally acknowledged as the text that ignited scholarly interest in *Jane Eyre* and its fairy tale intertexts (Knoepflmacher 2003, 22). Rowe notes the influence of "Beauty and the Beast," "Cinderella," "Bluebeard," "Snow-Drop," and "Sleeping Beauty" on the trajectory of the text. However, Rowe identifies these fairy tales and their attendant expectations as "unreliable, indeed dangerous, as they lead Jane closer to an illicit and immoral liaison with Mr. Rochester," insisting that these texts can not model feminine growth or maturity (Rowe 1983, 71). The essays that extend the conversation are surprisingly wide-ranging, exploring, for example, lesser known fairy tale intertexts (Edminster, Warren. 2003. "Fairies and Feminism: Recurrent Patterns in Chaucer's 'The Wife of Bath's Tale' and Brontë's *Jane Eyre*." *The Victorian Newsletter*. 104: 23-28), the connections between Jane and the Victorian fairy (Heiniger, Abigail. 2006. "The Faery and the Beast." *Brontë Studies*. 31: 23-2), and the significance of fairy-tale beauty (Cadwallader, Jen. 2009. "'Formed for labour, not for love': Plain Jane and the Limits of Female Beauty." *Brontë Studies* 34.3: 234-46.). Other authors have argued for the primacy of one particular fairy tale over the others (Pyrhönen, Heta. 2010. *Bluebeard Gothic: Jane Eyre and Its Progeny*. Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press.; Tatar, Maria. 2004. *Secrets Beyond the Door: The Story of Bluebeard and His Wives*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press., Clarke, Micael M. 2000. "Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and the Grimms' Cinderella." *Studies in English Literature*, 1500-1900. 40.4: 695-710.).

instead on relationships between women. By contrast, both "Beauty and the Beast" and "Bluebeard" are deeply engaged with the reality of living with a difficult, enigmatic man and the eventual outcome of this proximity. Edward Rochester is no charming prince, nor is Jane a submissive Cinderella. Their evolving relationship dominates the novel, but is it a companionate marriage or a fascination tainted by violence and mortality? We believe that the readers' act of identifying "Beauty and the Beast" (ATU 425) or "Bluebeard" (ATU 312)[2] as the primary intertext for the novel results in different impressions and ultimately different interpretations of the novel as a whole.

The term "intertextuality" "denote[s] a focus on the text and its correspondences with other literary works, the waning interest in the person of the author and the mounting interest in the reader, who was for the first time perceived as the (inter-)text's true maker."[3] Intertextual inquiry is, therefore, the act of finding allusions in a text and using those allusions to find meaning. The reader is the primary focus of intertextual analysis, as any intertextual reference will only produce effect so long as the reader recognizes it. The classic Western fairy tales, so ubiquitous in Western culture from the early 1800s on, are therefore particularly popular to draw on for intertextual allusion in British and American texts, a trend that

[2] It goes without saying, of course, that both fairy tales themselves produce vastly different responses from readers as well. While our inquiry here demands that we focus primarily on the most well-known and accepted interpretations of the two tales, other interpretations are certainly possible. For an interesting overview of several different studies considering responses to the Grimms' fairy tales in particular, see Donald Haase's chapter "Response and Responsibility in Reading Grimms' Fairy Tales" (1993).

[3] Turski, Marcin. 2001. "Intertextual Competence: The Reader's Key to the Treasure." *Studia Angelica Posnaniensia: International Review of English Studies*. 311+. *Academic OneFile*. Page 311.

continues into the present. For example, the classic film *Pretty Woman* (1990) draws extensively on the fairy tale of "Cinderella," and those who recognize this enjoy a richer, more complex film viewing experience. Readers of *Jane Eyre* today - and, indeed, those who read the novel when it was first published - are almost guaranteed to recognize the numerous fairy-tale elements that inform the text.

Our question is, therefore, what fairy tale do readers see in *Jane Eyre* and how does that choice affect reception? The "reader" of *Jane Eyre* is explicitly addressed throughout the novel, emphasizing the significance of audience in the telling of the tale. Reader-response criticism, which became popular in the 1970s, maintains that "the role of the reader cannot be omitted from our understanding of literature" and "that readers do not passively consume the meaning presented to them by an objective literary text; rather they actively make the meaning they find in literature."[4] We believe that the reader's choice regarding the primary fairy-tale intertext for *Jane Eyre* can ultimately determine the meaning they find in the novel.

"Beauty and the Beast" Reading

As Jerry Griswold aptly demonstrates in his study *The Meanings of "Beauty and the Beast": A Handbook*,[5] there are a multitude of versions of "Beauty and the Beast" and just as many possible interpretations.[6] Of most relevance to our reading is advocation for the companionate marriage. Understanding "Beauty and the Beast" as a plea for equality can open a feminist avenue into the text, one that suggests female agency and marriage rooted in respect and friendship.

The normative version of "Beauty and the Beast" is the short story by Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont (1756). In this version, Beauty's father steals a Beast's rose for Beauty, and the Beast demands his life as payment. Beauty insists on taking her father's place, and goes to the Beast's palace expecting to die. Instead, she is courted by the Beast, and begins to grow fond of him despite his monstrous appearance. After a period of separation, she voluntarily goes back to the Beast and agrees to marry him. Her love breaks the curse that was laid upon him by a wicked fairy, and he transforms into a handsome prince.

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4 Tyson, Lois. 2006. *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide*. 2nd Ed. New York: Routledge. Page 140

5 Griswold, Jerry. 2004. *The Meanings of Beauty and the Beast: A Handbook*. Toronto: Broadview Press Ltd.

6 Critics have identified meanings as wide-ranging as the navigation of the Electra complex, romantic wish-fulfillment, reconciliation to unhappy marriages, and justification for abusive relationships.

Jane Eyre, despite her plainness, resembles Beauty due to her explicit pursuit of personal agency and morality. Beaumont's "Beauty and the Beast" centers on "virtue" as opposed to physical beauty or wealth, and Beauty is "an active heroine whose physical and psychological journeys provide most of the narrative 'suspense' and whose decisions...advance the plot."[7] She is educated, industrious, and practical.

Both Beauty and Jane experience loneliness and isolation that only their enigmatic housemate can remedy; Beauty is waited on by invisible, silent servants, making the Beast the only available source of conversation, and Jane realizes that, of all the Thornfield household, only Rochester can provide the intellectual companionship she craves. The conversational centerpiece of Beaumont's "Beauty and the Beast" is explicitly reprised in *Jane Eyre*. Both Rowe and Knoepflmacher have noted that Brontë "borrows the initial conversation between Beaumont's Beast and Beauty to serve as an intertextual foil for the important exchange between Edward Rochester and Jane Eyre in chapter fourteen of her novel." [8]

In many ways, Beauty holds the upper hand, and the tale "dramatically emphasizes Beauty's power of free choice: she must come to the Beast of her own free will, she is not to be coerced but must choose freely to marry; she alone holds the power to transform the Beast." [9] Beauty repeatedly refuses the Beast's marriage proposal, and she must leave his castle for a time to visit family and reasses their relationship before returning to him. Likewise, Jane flees Thornfield after their aborted wedding ceremony, taking refuge with her family and cultivating a space in which she can become independent. While a magical cry from Rochester prompts her return-Beauty experiences a similarly enchanted intercession from a fairy in her dreams- she will only return and marry him on her own terms.

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7 Bacchilega, Cristina. 1997. *Postmodern Fairy Tales: Gender and Narrative Strategies.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

8 Knoepflmacher, U.C. 2003. "Introduction: Literary Fairy Tales and the Value of Impurity." *Marvels and Tales.* 17.1: 15-36. During their first meal, Beast asks Beauty, "...do not you think me very ugly?" to which Beauty offers the forthright reply, "That is true...for I cannot tell a lie" (Beaumont 1999, 35). In the parallel passage in *Jane Eyre*, Rochester asks Jane if she "think[s] me handsome?" (Brontë 2001, 112). Jane "should, if [she] had deliberated, have replied to this question by something conventionally vague and polite; but the answer somehow slipped from [her] tongue before [she] was aware:--'No, sir'" (Brontë 2001, 112). Like Beauty, Jane answers honestly, without flattery, delighting Rochester and highlighting Jane's refusal of subservience, even as she calls him her "Master."

9 Griswold, ibid. page 65.

The reader who sees a "Beauty and the Beast" story as the dominant intertext will accept the ending as happy, even triumphant for Jane. Through her tenacity, her devotion to her personal morality, and some fairy-tale luck, Jane enters a marriage in which her husband respects her intellectual and monetary independence. Like Beauty, she sees past her husband's physical disfigurement and disability to the man who has become her companion and friend. "Beauty and the Beast" offers a blueprint for a companionate marriage of equals, a blueprint that arguably provides the foundation for *Jane Eyre*. The reader who sees "Beauty and the Beast" will read a story that is ultimately romantic, empowering, and socially restorative.

"Bluebeard" Reading

What changes, however, when the fairy tale that the text evokes for the reader is not one of the "happily ever after" variety but instead "Bluebeard," a tale in which the heroine narrowly escapes her violent husband with her life? The most well-known "Bluebeard" story, Charles Perrault's version, is that of a girl who marries a mysterious man and is told, upon her arrival at his home, that she may explore anywhere she wishes except for one locked room. When her husband leaves her for a brief time, the girl's curiosity gets the better of her and she opens the door, discovering the dead bodies of her husband's many former wives. She drops the key in her fright and it becomes stained with blood she is unable to remove, causing her husband to realize she's been in the room when he returns home. The punishment for disobeying his order is her own death but she is saved at the last minute by her sister and brothers.[10]

Scholars have explored the resonances of ATU 312, "The Maiden-Killer," in *Jane Eyre* multiple times. Mr. Rochester's isolationist, enigmatic attitude and Byronic tendencies, his secret wife in the attic (so reminiscent of Bluebeard's multiple dead wives in his secret locked chamber), and the presence of a "female helper" character[11] are often cited as indications of the story's deep intertextual connection. Consider too the specific way that Thornfield initially reminds Jane of "Bluebeard's castle." [12] Further, as Doreen Roberts notes, *Jane Eyre* "offer[s] a mixed and restless reading experience," one that is

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[10] Perrault, Charles. 1999. "Bluebeard." In *The Classic Fairy Tales*, edited by Maria Tatar, 144-148. USA: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.

[11] Lovell-Smith, Rose. 2002. "Anti-Housewives and Ogres' Housekeepers: The Roles of Bluebeard's Female Helper." *Folklore*. 113.2: 197-214. Page 199.

[12] Brontë, Charlotte. 2001. *Jane Eyre: A Norton Critical Edition*. Edited by Richard J. Dunn, 3rd ed. New York: W. W. Norton and Company. Page 91.

"violent," "strange," and even "irritating" at times.[13] Brontë's style and the overall atmosphere of the novel both produce "tension and frustration"[14], traits common not only to Gothic novels but also the "Bluebeard" fairy tale. *Jane Eyre* is a haunted text, set on England's gloomy moors and ridden with secrets and tragedy.

The "Bluebeard" reading can be extended further if one adopts the position that Jane and Rochester's first wife Bertha function as mirrors of each other. As Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue in *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, "[w]hat Bertha... *does*... is what Jane wants to do." [15] For Gilbert and Gubar, Bertha embodies the rage, rebellion, and female sexuality that Jane feels but represses, physically manifesting Jane's frustration and anger in the text.[16] Bertha's death may well signify the death of the Jane who could question and defy Rochester. Considered this way, Rochester/Bluebeard gets what he wants - the death of any wife who works against his wishes.

Of course, *Jane Eyre* ends very differently from the "Bluebeard" tale, with the reconciliation and eventual marriage of Jane and Rochester. As Karen Rowe states, "it is deceptively easy to conclude that by adapting heroine tales Charlotte Brontë intends readers to accept unthinkingly the "happy-ever-after" ending of "Reader I married him."[17] Yuriko Notsu points out, however, that "two disquieting factors overshadow the 'perfect' ending": the fact that "the site at which it takes place hardly reflects such success in its dreary environment. That is, Jane professes the marital happiness of her last abode profusely - perhaps, rather too profusely" and secondly that Jane is "overtly silent" regarding the death of Rochester's first wife, almost as if she "deliberately abstains from referring to her in order to eliminate her presence,"[18] further arguing that "Jane's very silence upon [Bertha's] existence" "conversely evok[es] her shadow to the

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[13] Roberts, Doreen. 1980. "*Jane Eyre* and 'The Warped System of Things.'" In *Reading the Victorian Novel: Detail into Form*, edited by Ian Gregor, 131-149. New York: Barnes and Noble Books. Pages 131-132.

[14] Roberts, ibid. Page 138.

[15] Gilbert, Sandra M. and Susan Gubar. 1979. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination.* 2nd Ed. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. Page 359.

[16] Gilbert and Gubar, ibid. Pages 359-360.

[17] Rowe, Karen. 1983. "'Fairy-born and human-bred': Jane Eyre's Education in Romance." In *The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development* edited by Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsch, and Elizabeth Langland, 69-89. Hanover, New Hampshire: Univ. Press of New England. Page 77.

[18] Notsu, Yuriko. 2006. "Disenchanting the Fairy Tale: A Reading of *Jane Eyre*." *Studies in English Literature*. 47: 105-125. Page 112.

end."[19] The novel's notoriously perplexing final paragraph could also reinforce a more pessimistic reading of the text—instead of ending with a scene of Jane and Rochester's domestic harmony, the book concludes with a description of St. John River's failure to marry and of his impending demise.[20] Choosing to end the novel on this discordant note suggests that all may not be well with Mr. and Mrs. Rochester.

The reader who sees a "Bluebeard" story as opposed to a "Beauty and the Beast" tale will undoubtedly find the ending problematic, even troubling. Our intrepid heroine becomes little more than a nursemaid to a broken man, a sacrifice, a neutralizing agent that keeps him from the rest of the world at the expense of her much longed for freedom. Has Jane surrendered her independence in favor of being shackled to a wounded but still likely quite potent monster and the ghost of his former wife? Is Jane's acceptance of life with Rochester a commentary on the limited options for women of the time, or even the impossibility of "happily ever after"? As Jane herself says, "'[h]uman beings never enjoy complete happiness in this world. I was not born for a different destiny to the rest of my species; to imagine such a lot befalling me is a fairy tale."[21]

Conclusion

Carol Bock describes *Jane Eyre* as "a highly indeterminate novel"[22] and these two vastly different interpretations of the text seem to support that argument. The reader's dilemma over which fairy tale to take as the story's model helps determine his or her response to the book as a whole but also results in a duel-intertexting that ultimately echoes female ambiguity regarding men and marriage in nineteenth-century Britain. This narrative instability persists even if one intertext is chosen, as the other tale lingers on the page, unsettling and disrupting reader's expectations even as they attempt to resolve the nature of the story Brontë is telling. In complicating expected fairy-tale narratives, Brontë moves her heroine closer to truths not commonly explored in fiction of the time. Jane is not Beauty or Bluebeard's last wife but rather a representation of a flesh-and-blood woman caught somewhere between the inertia of fairy tale patterns and cultural reality.

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[19] Notsu, ibid. Page 113.

[20] Brontë, ibid. Page 385

[21] Brontë, ibid. Page 220.

[22] Bock, Carol. 1992. *Charlotte Brontë and the Storyteller's Audience.* Iowa City: University of Iowa Press. Page 69.